

Basics: Writing a Timed Essay

Writing a brilliant essay about a topic and a text you may never have seen before is difficult! You have to think and act fast if you are going to write something you can turn in with pride at the end of the allotted time. After reading these strategies for writing a timed essay, consult the annotated sample prompt, rubric, and paper. Note that most readers realize you are writing under difficult circumstances and are trained to “reward you for what you do well, not punish you for what you do wrong” as they say when scoring the AP Literature and Composition essays.

BEFORE

Preview, Pick, and Prepare

1. Preview all prompts (if you have choices) and pick the topic about which you can write the best essay (which may be different from the one about which you would *most* like to write).
2. Analyze the prompt, paying close attention to what you must *do* and *include*; this means identify and underline the required nouns and verbs (e.g., *compare* and *contrast*, *textual evidence* and *literary devices*).
3. Read and take useful notes—in the margins or on a separate piece of paper—related to your chosen prompt if you are writing about a text included in the test; if there is no text, proceed to the planning stage.

Plan

4. Generate compelling, specific ideas that are clearly related to the prompt.
5. Gather examples, quotations, evidence, or details from appropriate sources or the text you are analyzing.
6. Revisit the prompt to confirm that your ideas, examples, and evidence are appropriate to the prompt.
7. Sketch out a brief writing plan, outline, or mindmap *if time allows*; indicate the key connections and ideas.
8. Develop a thesis that is narrow and compelling, but also supportable and related to the prompt.
9. **Avoid** a formulaic thesis or restatement of the prompt itself if at all possible (to make a strong first impression)
10. Write *legibly*. What the reader can't read, they skip them, resulting in a lower grade.

DURING

Write

11. Establish your purpose and point quickly and in a compelling voice to make a strong first impression.
12. Use an organizational strategy appropriate to the prompt and your thesis, making sure it prevents writing a summary or mere description. Choosing a journey pattern, for example, gives the writer an analytical focus.
13. **Avoid** long introductions; instead, create a narrow, compelling argument you can then defend in the essay.
14. Organize each body paragraph around a specific topic sentence that makes an assertion related to your thesis (instead of beginning with description or narration which takes time and does not advance your argument).
15. Integrate specific examples, evidence, and details—and *comment on these*, explaining what the quotations or examples mean, why they are important, how they relate to your thesis or topic sentence.
16. **Avoid** summary; if you find yourself summarizing, keep asking yourself, “So what?” and “Who cares?” and “How is that related to my claim or the point I was trying to make?”
17. Revisit the prompt, checking that you are doing or including *everything* it requires.
18. Monitor the time: You must write a *complete* essay with a beginning, middle, and end. Every second counts!
19. Take time to write well: You have no time to revise, so pay attention along the way to make sure that you:
 - ❑ Pay as much attention to *what* you write as you to *how* you write: voice and style matter!
 - ❑ Use strong verbs, precise nouns, and a variety of sentence types appropriate to your purpose.
 - ❑ Provide effective transitions to clarify and emphasize your ideas and the connections between them.
 - ❑ Organize your ideas in paragraphs that are visibly indented, fully developed, and purposefully arranged.
 - ❑ **Avoid** any grandstanding, editorializing, ranting, seeking pity, asking for mercy, or making excuses.
20. Conclude the essay, tying up all your ideas, connecting them to the thesis; however, do more than just restate what you have already said. Reach for the great closing line that delivers to the reader a final WOW!

AFTER

Revisit and Refine

21. Revisit the prompt and, if available, the rubric to make sure you have done *everything* the prompt asks.
22. Edit and proofread as needed depending on the number, type, and severity of your errors.
23. Follow any other minor directions for which you might be penalized: indicating which prompt you wrote about, attaching the prompts, scoring rubric, or notes you may have made to prepare to write.

Troubleshooting

- What if you do not understand the topic or the text you must write about?
- What if reading and writing are difficult for you and so you need more time to complete this assignment?
- What if you write better on the computer than on paper?

Annotated Classroom: Sample AP Literature In-Class Essay Exam with Prompt

Verbs are **bold**;
nouns are
highlighted.

Prompt In great literature, no scene of violence exists for its own sake. **Choose** a work of literary merit that **confronts** the reader or audience with a scene or scenes of violence. In a well-organized essay, **explain** how the scene or scenes **contribute** to the meaning of the complete work. **Avoid** plot summary.

Note the title:
Adds insight,
creates a frame.

Alexander T.

Per. 2/Burke

We Are the Good Guys

Opens with
compelling
imagery related to
prompt.

The Road, by Cormac McCarthy begins with a human head on a stake in the middle of the road. It later follows with the boy staring at a bloody mattress with

Establishes critical
frame and subject
by third sentence.

a woman on it, screaming because both of her legs have been sawed off. **These examples of extremely graphic violence show the most animalistic side of human behavior**, which McCarthy uses to demonstrate humanity's constant struggle with the inner beast.

Provides narrow
claim that
addresses prompt
w/o repeating it.

We, as a species, are always torn between emotion and reason.

Begins second ¶
with focused
statement related
to previous ¶ and
thesis.

Oftentimes the struggle is greatest when we are put in the most dire circumstances. This is evident in The Road, where nuclear holocaust tests our humanity and then tests our basic will to survive, which are two very different things. The struggle between these things is emphasized by scenes of grotesque violence, which accentuate our animalistic flaws, and an innocent boy, who is present at these scenes of violence and who represents our future and our capacity to love.

Situates and
elaborates on
previous idea,
then illustrates
with example.

Introduces new
point that builds
on topic sentence;
then examines use
and meaning of
violence.

The boy often questions his father about the

surrounding violence, presenting an individual struggle between right and wrong that is representative of the entire species' struggle.

Contrasts
two ideas
with great
style and
rhetorical
effect.

Begins with
narrative then
shifts to analysis,
reestablishing
connection to
thesis but
introducing new
ideas.

The questioning often involves the boy repeatedly asking whether they are the guy guys or not, and why the bad guys want to eat them. **McCarthy uses this loss of innocence throughout the novel to make the reader aware of not only the**

Annotated Classroom: Sample AP Literature In-Class Essay Exam with Prompt

Sustains focus on author's purpose and how achieves it

desperation the nuclear winter has caused but what we have done in times of great suffering. A boy and his father, scarred by the apocalypse of humankind, struggle to maintain their compassion and their essential humanity because it is their only valuable possession.

Offers summary, then analysis of effect, followed by explanation of importance.

Expands idea and thesis of duality of our nature.

The combination of compassion and great violence illustrates the duality of our race. The scenes of violence in The Road question our worth, while the boy confirms it; he proves that even though a majority of us will commit atrocities and turn on one another in order to survive, there are a small few who justify our existence by maintaining grace in the worst of times.

Drills down to examine meaning, import of previous lines, link to larger themes.

The Road's dual image of carnage and compassion shows us that it is not enough to simply survive, because to live without the things that make us so vulnerable is pointless. It tells us that it is not enough to simply survive, but we must prove that we are worthy of surviving.

Delivers Wow! last line, which transforms this in-class essay into a work of compelling ideas and fine writing.

Uses repetition (shows, tells) to emphasize the final point in last line.

What AP Readers Long to See

This list was compiled during the 1994 AP English Reading at Trinity University in San Antonio.

1. Read the prompt. It hurts to give a low score to someone who misread the prompt but wrote a good essay.
2. Do everything the prompt asks. Most writers focus on a few strategies and never fully answer the question.
3. Think before you write. Which strategies are used and how do they answer the prompt?
4. Plan your response. It is not easy for the reader to pick over an essay attempt to decipher sentences. A little organization will help you avoid extensive editing.
5. Make a strong first impression. Build your opening response. Don't parrot the prompt word for word. The reader knows it from memory.
6. Begin your response immediately. Do not take a circuitous route with generalizations.
7. Be thorough and specific. Do not simply "point out" strategies. Explain how they are used, give examples, and show how they establish what the question is asking. No long quotes!
8. Use clear transitions that help the reader follow the flow of your essays. Keep your paragraphs organized; do not digress.
9. Resist putting in a "canned" quotation or critic's comment if it does not fit. You will get a response from your reader but it will not be the one you want.
10. Write to express, not to impress. Keep vocabulary and syntax within your zone of competence. Students who inflate their writing often inadvertently entertain, but seldom explain.
11. Demonstrate that you understand style. Show the reader how the author has developed the selection to create the desired effect. This indicates that you understand the intricacies of the creative process.
12. Maintain an economy of language: saying much with few words. The best student writers see much, but say it quite succinctly. Often ideas are embedded rather than listed.
13. Let your writing dance with ideas and insights. You can receive a 6 or a 7 with a lockstep approach, but the essays that earn 8's and 9's expand to a wider perspective.
14. Write legibly. If a reader cannot read half the words (especially at 4:30 P.M. on the sixth day of a reading) you will not get a fair reading - even if your essay is passed on to a reader with keener eyesight. Patience decreases as the reading progresses.
15. Let your work stand on its own merits. Avoid penning "pity me" notes ("I was up all night." "I have a cold," etc.) to the reader.